

Washington wetlands protection to be improved

OLYMPIA - State and federal agencies have developed new guidance on how to restore, replace and enhance wetlands for fish, wildlife, clean water and flood control as land is converted for road building and commercial and residential expansion.

The Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have developed joint guidance that will improve wetland "mitigation" and help applicants save time and money by clearly outlining what information needs to be provided to the agencies that need to decide whether a permit can be issued.

Wetland mitigation is required when an agency issues a permit for a construction project that affects wetlands. Project proponents must avoid or minimize any damage to wetlands as much as is practical. However, if some damage is still unavoidable, the next step is to restore, create, or enhance wetland areas to compensate for the environmental and human benefits lost or degraded through the permitted activities.

Wetlands provide many benefits to society because they filter pollutants from the water, provide fish and wildlife habitat, store flood waters and maintain surface water flow during dry periods.

"Recent studies of how we've managed wetlands show that we continue to fall short in replacing wetland acreage, environmental and human benefits, or both," said Gordon White, who manages Ecology's shorelines program. "This document will improve wetland management by making sure we do a better job of designing and implementing these wetland mitigation projects."

"In the past, some of these efforts to make up for lost wetlands have not been as successful as we'd like," said Ron Kreizenbeck, EPA deputy regional administrator for Region 10 in Seattle. "In addition, past regulations and guidance in Washington State have been inconsistent and that adds unnecessary time and expense to projects."

The new guidance provides predictability and consistency by aligning the three agencies' requirements and expectations for how wetlands are managed in the face of construction projects.

Local governments can now adapt their local ordinances to be consistent with the new state/federal guidance and know that they are using the most current and best available wetland science.

"Using this guidance will protect the environment by helping to ensure that proposals to replace wetlands are located in an appropriate place, designed well and implemented effectively," said Muffy

walker, Chief of the Regulatory Branch for the Seattle District, Army Corps of Engineers.

Proponents and designers of projects that affect wetlands can develop better proposals and plans that will have a higher likelihood of being approved more quickly and of successfully protecting the environment.

The guidance document, called, Wetland Mitigation in Washington State, is available at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/biblio/0606011a.html> . It has two separate sections. Part 1 is Agency Policy and Guidance. Part 2 is Developing Mitigation Plans.

Contact: Jani Gilbert, Ecology, 509-329-3495; cell, 509-990-9177

Tony Brown, EPA, 206-553-1203

Gail Terzi, Corps of Engineers, 206 764-6903

For more information: Ecology's Web site: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov>
<<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/>>